HOLY CROSS TRACTS
Number 6

Calling Priests "Father"

Dear Mr.————:

I have your letter in which you ask about the growing custom in the Episcopal Church of using the title "Father" in addressing priests. First let me say that I do think this matter too trifling a one for anyone to get excited about it. The use of titles in addressing people in various positions is so settled a custom in polite society that no one quarrels with it and most people are quite content to follow prevailing custom in this regard. I am sure little attention would be given to one who spent his energies protesting against the custom of calling physicians by the title "Doctor." But the custom of using the title "Father" for priests does seem to create considerable mental disturbance in some and I agree with you that we should be able to answer the question "why" in regard to it.

Actually there is no hard and fast rule in this matter anywhere in the Church. Not many years ago, it was a fairly settled custom among all English speaking people to call all priests "Mister," excepting those who were monks. The

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latter were always called "Father." This custom is still followed among Roman Catholics in France today. But among English speaking members of the Church it seems to have been felt that the title "Mister" was too formal to use in addressing one who has such an intimate family relationship to his people as has the parish priest. And this feeling has resulted in a growing use of the intimate title "Father" for all priests, whether they are monks or not.

The title is cherished by most of us because it is such a simple expression of the relationship which we love to have to all people. Certainly it is entirely in line with Prayer Book usage. The only times any minister is addressed directly in the Prayer Book is when a priest presents candidates for confirmation or ordination. In these cases the Prayer Book directs that the title "Father" be used and the Bishop is addressed, "Reverend Father in God." The similar address to priests is simply an extension of this Prayer Book usage.

Considerable confusion has been caused on this subject by the application of one of our Lord's sayings to the matter. In speaking to his disciples about the supremacy of the Father, he said, "Call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven. Neither be ye called masters: for one is your Master, even Christ." It ought to be obvious that our Lord was not talking about such an insignificant matter as titles here. If this were a literal prohibition of certain words, then "call no man YOUR father

upon the earth" would mean that we must deny our relationship to our earthly fathers—an absurd idea. And the phrase "neither be ye called masters" would prohibit the use of the title "Mister" to anyone. For "Mister" is only a modern form of the old English title "Master." The fact is that this saying of our Lord has nothing at all to do with titles of address and should not be applied to so insignificant a matter.

The feeling that it is somehow wrong to address a parson by the same title used to address laymen seems to be very general today. Some people get around this feeling by addressing all ministers as "Doctor." This is a title properly given to men who have a doctor's degree from some college or university and it is therefore wrong in the case of a man who does not have such a degree. Others have seized upon the adjective "Reverend" to use as a title. A minister is entitled, in common usage, to use the adjective "Reverend" before his full name ("The Rev. A. B. Smith") or before his title ("The Rev. Father Smith, the Rev. Mr. Smith, or the Rev. Dr. Smith") but an adjective must not be used as a title. To say "Reverend Smith" is like addressing the President of the United States as "Honorable Truman" and to call a minister or priest simply "Reverend" is exactly the same as calling the President "Honorable."

At any rate, titles are a small matter in the mighty affairs of the Christian religion. I hope you will continue your usual habit of calling all priests of the Church by that intimate, familiar term

of family relationship and that you will not fuss too much when someone, who does not feel this deep affection for priests, persists in using the formal title "Mister."

And do be grateful that you have been delivered from the silly extremities to which prejudice sometimes leads. I once heard of a woman who had to have some dealings with a nun whose name was "Sister Mary Thomas." Too prejudiced to use the proper title, she persisted in calling the poor sister "Miss Thomas"—much to the merriment of the whole community of nuns. How thankful we should be that silly prejudice does not force us into the use of poor grammar or make us look ridiculous.

Faithfully yours,

SP 10M 11-52

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